Several years ago, I was leading a team-building workshop for an Army program office at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, and I had divided the group into five-person teams to compete against each other in a desert survival simulation exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to stress the importance of up-front planning and teamwork in successful project management.

I carefully watched the groups as they held their initial planning meetings before starting off across the simulated desert. One of the teams caught my eye since it seemed much better organized and more team-oriented

I then had a flashback to the last Air Force missile development program I worked on before making my career change into project management training. As a branch chief in

> **"THE TEAM'S ENTHUSIASM WAS EXCELLENT—BUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WAS MINIMAL."**

that program office, I had mid-level military and civilian team members working with me, each with several years of experience in their field. On a return visit to the program office a few years later, I was shocked to find a very junior officer as the branch chief with young

BACK TO BASICS

BY DR. OWEN GADEKEN

than the rest. This team rapidly chose a leader and then subdivided the remaining tasks so that each person had a meaningful role. They had a high energy level with all team members participating during the planning meeting. I confidently predicted (to myself) that this team would achieve the highest score on the exercise.

One of the tasks confronting each team in the exercise was to calculate and then purchase the supplies they would need for their desert journey, allowing for contingencies such as extreme heat and sand storms. As the groups started out, I kept my eye on my "favored" team. I was quite surprised when midway through the exercise, they ran out of supplies and "died in the desert," achieving the lowest score of the teams competing.

In the debriefing, I discovered that this team had no members with mathematical aptitude, so they had only made a "rough guess" at their need for supplies. They had a smoothly functioning team but were incompetent to perform one of their required tasks.

THE CALCULUS OF COOPERATION

Teaming is so common in today's project management environment that most of us assume it comes naturally. We further assume that when presented with meaningful and challenging work, project teams will naturally engage in productive activity to complete their tasks. This assumption is expressed in the simple (but false) equation: Team + Work = Teamwork. Although this equation appears simple and straightforward, it is far from true for most project organizations. Simply stated, most teams are dysfunctional by nature. To overcome these restraining forces and use the potential power of the team, greater emphasis must be placed on establishing and maintaining group cohesiveness. This relationship is expressed in the revised (true) mathematical equation: **Team + Work (on the Team) = Teamwork.**

—*Owen Gadeken,* ASK Magazine, *Issue 7*

lieutenants and recently hired civilian college graduates making up the team. The team's enthusiasm was excellent—but their experience was minimal.

This same scenario is repeated again and again as our organizations lose their most experienced people through downsizing and early retirements, and then attempt to compensate by creating teams of newer and less experienced replacements. The trouble is that technical competence and specialized experience are often very hard to find and recruit in a competitive job market. Such experience also takes time to develop within the organization.

Basically, experience counts. We need to accept the significance of that statement, and act on it. It's one thing to discover the need for expertise through simulated deaths in a simulated desert—but when it comes to many government projects, it's often real lives that are on the line. •

LESSONS
• Before embarking on a new and challenging project, make sure you have the "basic building blocks" of expertise in place. It takes good, technically competent people to get a good product from a team.
• Project organizations must be proactive in recruiting and developing the specialized expertise they need to stay at the cutting edge in their field.

QUESTION
How can you be sure your team has the expertise it needs to succeed?